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ABROAD AT HOME

The Reagan Silence

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Sept. 11 — From the moment it took office the Reagan Administration has carried on a determined campaign to deny the public information about the workings of government. The White House and the Justice Department have acted through a series of executive decisions, without getting authority from Congress for the new suppression.

This week a Senate committee will hold a hearing on the latest and by far the most serious Reagan device to prevent informed public discussion. The occasion will begin to test the ability and the will of Congress to deal with spreading official censorship.

The subject of the hearing is a National Security Decision Directive issued by the President last March 11. It orders all departments of the Federal Government to adopt a system of prior restraint previously used only by the C.I.A. and other intelligence agencies. Any Government employee who has access to secret material called Sensitive Compartmented Information (S.C.I.) must sign an agreement promising to clear any manuscript or speech that may contain intelligence information — even after he leaves the Government, for the rest of his life.

Words like "sensitive" and "intelligence" tend to scare off some people who would ordinarily take a hard look at official claims; after all, they say, the Government must protect its real secrets. But the Reagan order goes very much further. Its breadth — its truly astonishing breadth — became clear when the Justice Department last month published the official "nondisclosure agreement" to be used by Government agencies.

The 100,000 Government workers who see S.C.I. will have to sign the agreement. But its terms are not limited to S.C.I. — or even to classified information. An employee must promise to show future manuscripts to censors if they may contain:

"(a) Any S.C.I., any description of activities that produce or relate to S.C.I., or any information derived from S.C.I.;

"(b) Any classified information from intelligence reports or estimates; or

"(c) Any information concerning intelligence activities, sources or methods."

The last of those categories covers unclassified material. The second includes classified information from finished intelligence estimates, much of which is common coin in Washington discussions and is regularly reported in the press without claimed damage to national security.

The text of the agreement makes clear that anyone who signs it will be covered for the rest of his life. The employee must "understand and agree that my obligation to submit . . . materials for review applies during the course of my access to S.C.I. and at all times thereafter."

What this means is that a lawyer or journalist or scholar who works for the Government briefly — a Cyrus Vance or a Henry Kissinger — will not be able to write freely on national security issues thereafter. He will have to clear not only books, according to the Justice Department, but "newspaper columns, magazine articles, letters to the editor, book reviews, pamphlets and scholarly papers." Works of fiction are included, too.

If you learn something while in Government service, and later that fact is disclosed by the President, you may still need approval to publish it yourself. There is no exemption in the Justice Department text.

Nor is it clear that a person who leaves government and years later learns something about "intelligence activities" is free to write about the subject without prior approval. The text says that a former Government employee need not submit a manuscript for review if it contains such material "lawfully obtained by me." What does "lawfully" mean? Does it include the ordinary leak?

The Soviet destruction of the Korean airliner has provided a telling example of how the Reagan order would squelch public discussion. All kinds of former officials have written about the affair — about Soviet tactics and American intelligence abilities — in ways that would now require approval by a censor.

In 1982 former officials wrote more than 300 articles for the op-ed pages of five leading American newspapers on national security subjects. That does not include the work of former officials who are now full-time journalists. How conceivably could these pieces be censored quickly enough so they would still be publishable?

The idea that an American government would try to inhibit discussion by the best-informed people on the country's editorial pages sounds ridiculous, but it is not. That is exactly what the Reagan people want to do: National Security Adviser Clark, Attorney General Smith and the rest. They want secrecy, and they are ingenious and relentless in working for it.

The hearing this week, called by the full Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, should throw light on the censorship campaign. The late Senator Henry Jackson, who had a great interest in the subject, will be missed. Another Democratic member of the committee is Senator John Glenn. Does Congress care? We shall see.